



2024 SWCS Advocacy Plan

Background

SWCS is the premier international organization for professionals who practice and advance the science and art of natural resource conservation. Our mission is to foster the science and art of natural resource conservation. We aim to cultivate a diverse community of conservation professionals whose contributions create a bright future for our environment, agriculture and society.

We support our community of more than 2,000 conservation professionals that represent nearly every academic discipline and many different public, private, and nonprofit institutions around the world. **A conservation professional** is an unwavering advocate for conservation with steadfast curiosity and deep passion for our world's natural resources. Conservation professionals are **scientists and practitioners** who represent all aspects of soil and water conservation, from the lab to the field.

Beyond our membership, we strive to promote and demonstrate the value of conservation to a broader group of stakeholders that depend on our soil, water, and related natural resources, alongside our members. As we push to advance conservation, these stakeholders are essential to making conservation standard practice worldwide.

The SWCS Advocacy Plan was developed with contributions from the broader SWCS membership, the Science and Policy (S&P) Committee members, leadership, and staff. The following timeline represents the steps taken to ensure engagement:

- July 2023: Introduced the concept of the advocacy plan to S&P Committee
- August 2023: Collected feedback at the Regional Roundtable session of the SWCS Annual Conference
- September 2023: S&P Committee established priority goals for the Advocacy Plan
- October 2023: S&P Committee provided feedback on implementation activities, roles, and processes
- November 2023: S&P Committee presented with full draft plan to review
- December 2023: Completed Advocacy Plan presented to the S&P Committee and Board for final review

Additionally, in November 2023, the SWCS Board approved a strategic framework to guide their work in the next three years. The following outcomes and outputs will be achieved through the SWCS Advocacy Plan.

Industry Outcome: Conservation professionals are informed. The voice of the conservation professional is influencing policy and program development.

Organizational Outcome: SWCS is leading and influencing policy, partnerships, and projects that are developing new and existing conservation professionals and transforming the industry based on their needs.

Outputs:

- Special projects are leveraging SWCS’s unique, established position in conservation. They are building upon past and current knowledge, assessing and addressing the needs of conservation professionals, expanding adoption of conservation practices, spanning geographies, and having a multi-scale impact—from on-the-ground initiatives to influencing national policies.
- Annual policy priorities are released and SWCS is engaging members and working with partners to advance shared priorities and respond to pertinent policy issues.

Definitions

Advocacy: Advocacy, especially within the context of a nonprofit organization like SWCS, refers to the act of supporting, promoting, or actively working towards a particular cause, issue, or mission. Nonprofit advocacy involves raising awareness, influencing public opinion, and mobilizing support to bring about positive social, political, or environmental change.

Lobbying: The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) defines lobbying as activities to influence specific legislation. As a 501(c)(3) organization, SWCS may engage in some lobbying, but too much lobbying activity risks loss of tax-exempt status. Lobbying also includes supporting political candidates - SWCS will not endorse or support political candidates.

Key SWCS Advocacy Considerations

The Voice of Conservation Professionals

Conservation professionals are THE delivery system for natural resource conservation across the nation. Conservation professionals are the on-the-ground, frontline workers who work tirelessly to ensure we have clean water, nutritious food, and healthy ecosystems for years to come. They work directly with landowners to increase conservation practice adoption, research and

measure soil and water progress, and create innovative systems and technologies to increase conservation efficiency. The conservation professional plays the most vital role in the conservation movement and there is a need for SWCS to equip and encourage individuals and groups to push the movement forward and meet the growing demand.

SWCS can uniquely bring the voice of interdisciplinary conservation professionals to policy conversations and help to find common ground and practical solutions to conservation challenges.

Creating Pathways and Opportunities for all Conservation Professionals

SWCS represents federal and state employees across agencies working in soil, water, and other natural resources conservation. This creates opportunities and barriers for advocacy efforts. When weighing in on policy issues, it is valuable to seek input from conservation professionals who work in government positions, but those individuals must also adhere to the guidelines of their employers on policy engagement.

While we will leverage the scientific and practical expertise of all conservation professionals, we will also be cognizant of any limitations that exist for members based on their employment.

Building Upon Past Efforts in Washington, DC

For the past two years, Clare Lindahl (SWCS CEO) has spent an extended period of time in Washington, DC each spring to build and strengthen partnerships, share SWCS priorities, and work with the National Capital Chapter. These activities have served as the foundation for SWCS to develop proposals and win grants, host events centered on soil, water, and related natural resources conservation for DC-based partners, be asked to serve on national boards, and position the organization as a leader in conservation policy discussions.

The CEO-in-residence in Washington DC will continue to serve as a foundational component of SWCS advocacy efforts.

Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

SWCS seeks diverse voices, actively listens, engages in dialogue, thinks critically, and takes meaningful action toward creating institutions and systems that serve and value people equally. Our goals for the world's soil, water, and other natural resources cannot be realized without justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The Soil and Water Conservation Society denounces the systemic racism, discrimination, and inequality that exist today. Racism, discrimination, and inequality of any kind go against SWCS's core values, which include respect for people and cultures, and the unification of people with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and ideas.

We expect justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion to be a component of all aspects of the advocacy plan.

Advocacy Priorities

To meet the overarching goal within the strategic framework, SWCS proposes the following high-level priorities to guide our advocacy efforts. The advocacy priorities below were developed based on feedback from the Board, Science and Policy Committee members, external science and policy experts, and time in Washington, DC working with partners.

1. Conservation Professionals are Informed and Equipped

In order for conservation professionals to effectively engage in policy and advocacy efforts, they must be aware of opportunities and the context from which they arise. This only happens if conservation professionals receive regular information about what's happening in Washington, DC and beyond and further understand the importance of their engagement in policy conversations.

Conservation professionals should also understand how to respond to various policy and advocacy opportunities, such as proposed administrative changes), pending legislation, calls for nominations, and funding decisions. To prepare for these situations, individuals, especially the next generation of conservation professionals, can build relationships with government officials and participate in workshops to build advocacy skills. As an organization, SWCS must be equipped to respond when issues arise by building relationships with decision-makers, engaging broadly with our members, and positioning ourselves as the voice of conservation professionals.

2. The Voice of Conservation Professionals is Represented in Policy Decisions

SWCS has the opportunity to bring the voices of conservation professionals to various policy conversations, not solely by speaking as an authority on soil, water, and related natural resources conservation, but also by sharing the diverse perspectives from the range of different conservation professionals, researchers, and practitioners represented in our membership. In some cases, SWCS may take an official stance on issues, but typically, SWCS will serve as a facilitator to bring forward the work and experiences of members and help to find common ground.

Scope: Based on feedback from SWCS leaders, members, and external advisors, advocacy efforts will focus on federal issues within the United States, and with additional capacity, should expand to briefly cover international, regional, and state issues as well. Topic areas of interest include agriculture, soil, and water policies focused on conservation, research, education, and outreach. SWCS will work to bring the voice of conservation professionals to pending legislation (e.g., Farm Bill) and rule-making in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In some cases, SWCS may also weigh in on pending court decisions through the *Amicus brief* process.

Further, we will look for ways to formally position conservation professionals as experts to inform policy discussions and decisions. For instance, we will work with committee leadership to suggest witnesses for Congressional hearings, nominate professionals for Federal Advisory Boards, and host an annual briefing to share scientific and conservation practice priorities with lawmakers.

3. Soil and Water Conservation is Enhanced through Partnerships

SWCS has a long history of conducting program evaluation through cooperating agreements with USDA. These efforts are an important way that SWCS can partner with federal agencies to improve the experiences of conservation professionals and further promote soil, water, and related natural resources conservation across the United States. SWCS will continue to look for partnership opportunities through grants and cooperating agreements with USDA, EPA, and other appropriate federal and state agencies.

In addition, SWCS is in a unique position to foster public-private partnerships across the conservation industry, including with non-governmental organizations, private companies, universities, and think tanks. Our advocacy efforts will be enhanced by actively building relationships with diverse partners and engaging with coalitions.

4. Conservation Professionals Feel Ownership in SWCS Advocacy Efforts

In all advocacy efforts, it will be important to foster community engagement and make sure that conservation professionals have a direct role and input. Core input will come from the SWCS Science & Policy (S&P) Committee, and we will also create opportunities for professionals across regions and backgrounds to weigh in on annual priorities and other issues as they arise.

Historically, the S&P Committee has hosted guest speakers at their monthly meetings to discuss emerging scientific topics. It will be important for the committee to continue similar events by bringing in subject-matter experts to ‘brief’ the committee members and staff on important, policy-relevant topics. The Advocacy Plan and any official documents or stances will be approved by the SWCS Board of Directors.

Implementation Strategy & Activities

This section will outline and describe activities to achieve the strategic goal and advocacy priorities. Because many of these activities will be new to SWCS, the plan for 2024 will likely look slightly different and contain more planning elements than will be necessary in the future. In 2024, it will be important to continually collect feedback from leaders, committee members, and other stakeholders.

1. Conservation Professionals are Informed and Equipped

Keeping Members Informed | SWCS Staff Lead

- Share policy updates and opportunities for feedback with the S&P Committee. The following topics may be of interest:
 - Federal conservation and research funding opportunities
 - Announcements from USDA, EPA, and other federal agencies
 - Public comment opportunities
 - Soil, water, and related natural resources policy updates at the federal, state, and international levels
- Share relevant updates and opportunities with conservation professionals through:
 - Social Media
 - Conservation News Briefs
 - Quarterly Conservogram Articles (*Written by Staff or S&P Members*)
 - Annual Conference Presentations
- Provide regular updates to the SWCS Board of Directors
- Share regional/state updates with relevant chapters

Host Workshops, Training, and Events to Build Advocacy Skills | SWCS Staff Lead

- Host 2 webinars/year focused on advocacy skill building. The following are example topics for the webinars:
 - Engaging with your Elected Officials (within job restrictions)
 - Understanding the Federal Budget Process
 - Writing Public Comments
 - Developing Federal Advisory Committee Nomination Packages
 - Hosting State-Level Legislative Visits
- Host an annual Washington, DC Fly-In aligned with federal budget cycle
 - Plan for an annual event in February or March, starting in 2025
 - Invite participants to join, if their employment allows
 - Create a mechanism to support select participants to attend the fly-in
- Create policy engagement opportunities for the Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) participants

- Offer to host workshops and develop resources for Student and Professional Chapters on issues of interest
 - Survey chapters to identify what they need from SWCS

2. The Voice of Conservation Professionals is Represented in Policy Decisions

Create SWCS Policy and Appropriations Priorities | Board and S&P Committee Lead

- Finish the Farm Bill priorities white paper to be used as a foundation for an annual policy platform
- Determine scope of issues of interest and identify top priorities
- Develop a list of budget priorities (e.g., Conservation TA, research funding)
- Create a process to regularly update policy platform as issues emerge and arise

Monitor Top Issues and Take Action | SWCS Staff Lead

- Retain SWCS strategic advisor to pursue policy priorities.
- Monitor the following arenas, to the extent possible, to identify opportunities for action
 - U.S. Congress - Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Environment committees (*Farm Bill top priority for 2024*)
 - USDA, EPA, and DOI agency actions
 - High-level international and state-level issues (e.g., IPCC)
- Actively participate in coalition meetings
 - Ag Conservation Coalition
 - US Water Alliance
 - Source Water Collaborative
 - Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Coalition
 - National Coalition for Food and Agriculture Research (NCFAR)
 - NRCS Quarterly Stakeholder Calls

Proactively take action on policy priorities, when needed | SWCS Staff Lead

- Issue annual statement on appropriations priorities and submit general requests to Congress
- Provide feedback and educational materials on relevant policies
- Host an annual Congressional briefing to raise awareness of SWCS and soil, water, and related natural resources conservation science and practice
 - *This could coincide with Congressional visits with SWCS CEO and board members to build relationships for SWCS*
- Respond to relevant public comment opportunities for new rules and requests for information

- Submit nominations for relevant federal advisory councils
- *Long-term*: Suggest witnesses and submit questions for Congressional hearings

3. Soil and Water Conservation is Enhanced through Partnerships

Monitor for Grant and Cooperative Agreement Opportunities | SWCS Staff Lead

- Focus on funding opportunities that:
 - Align with the SWCS Strategic Framework
 - Support foundational SWCS programs (e.g., Journal, Annual Conference)
 - Enhance the professional development of conservation professionals
 - Create new opportunities for next generation conservation professionals
 - Develop new revenue streams or enhance existing revenue streams for SWCS
- Regularly meet with agency and external partners to explore opportunities
 - Take advantage of relationship building while CEO visits Washington, DC
 - Follow up with contacts throughout the year
 - Assist staff, board members, and S&P committee members to engage regularly with partners
- Work with appropriate partners to draft proposals and administer grants

Support SWCS CEO Annual Washington, DC Stay | SWCS Staff Lead

- Build capacity for the National Capital Chapter to facilitate long-term partnerships with DC-based organizations
- Meet with USDA, EPA, and other related agency leadership to share SWCS priorities
- Meet with members of Congress and staff to discuss SWCS priorities and advocate for appropriations requests
- Participate in DC-based coalition meetings and networking events, such as the Ag Conservation Coalition meeting

4. Conservation Professionals Feel Ownership in SWCS Advocacy Efforts

Collect Regular Feedback from Subject-Matter Experts and Members | S&P Committee Lead

- Host roundtables and listening sessions with experts on policy-related topics
 - Regularly bring in guest speakers for S&P Committee meetings
 - When drafting comments or white papers, bring in subject-matter experts to speak with S&P Committee members and staff
 - Create regular internal and external communications to report out on listening sessions and roundtable discussions
- Conduct an Annual Membership Survey for Advocacy Feedback

- *This is especially important in year 1 to identify priorities for the organization*
- Include questions to guide development of annual policy priorities, budget requests, and advocacy workshop needs
- Use survey as a way to get names of people interested in advocacy efforts or nomination opportunities

Host a Session or Make a Presentation at the Annual Conference | S&P Committee Lead

- Brainstorm session ideas in December-January
- Submit proposals or solicit ideas from broader membership
- Invite speakers and/or create presentations in advance of annual conference
- Facilitate session at the annual conference with support from SWCS staff
- Review advocacy efforts to the assembly of delegates and regional roundtables

Support Members to Publish Policy-Relevant White Papers | SWCS Staff Lead

- Many SWCS members are unable to participate in advocacy activities due to employer restrictions. However, they can still participate by compiling the most up-to-date information in the form of white papers, presentations, and publications.
- SWCS staff can assist by soliciting publications on topics of policy-relevance and providing review.

Calendar of Activities - Year 1

	Informed and Equipped	Voice in Policy Decisions	Partnerships	Professionals Feel Ownership
January		Release Farm Bill Priorities Release Federal Budget Priorities		Annual Survey to Membership Develop new guidelines, meeting schedule, and agendas for S&P Committee
February	Conservogram Article	Approve Federal Budget Sign-ons		Federal Budget Listening Session
March		Approve Federal Budget Sign-ons	SWCS CEO in DC	Develop Budget for 2024-2025 Advocacy Plan
April	Talk with ELP Participants		SWCS CEO in DC	Board input on policy priorities
May	Conservogram Article		SWCS CEO in DC	Listening Session or Roundtable
June				
July	Opportunities at SWCS Annual Conference	Opportunities at SWCS Annual Conference	Opportunities at SWCS Annual Conference	Opportunities at SWCS Annual Conference
August	Conservogram Article			Listening Session or Roundtable
September				
October				
November	Plan for DC Fly-in			Post-Election Roundtable

	Conservogram Article			
December	Plan for DC Fly-In			Brainstorm Conference Session Ideas

Calendar of Activities - Years 2-3

	Informed and Equipped	Voice in Policy Decisions	Partnerships	Professionals Feel Ownership
January	Select Participants for DC Fly-in	Release Federal Budget Priorities		Annual Survey to Membership Develop Conference Session Proposal(s)
February	Plan for DC Fly-in Conservogram Article	Approve Federal Budget Sign-ons	SWCS CEO in DC	Submit Conference Session Proposal(s) Federal Budget Listening Session
March	Host Washington DC Fly-In	Host Washington DC Fly-In Approve Federal Budget Sign-ons	SWCS CEO in DC	Develop Budget for Advocacy Efforts
April	Talk with ELP Participants		SWCS CEO in DC	
May	Conservogram Article			Listening Session or Roundtable
June				
July	Opportunities at SWCS Annual Conference	Plan for Congressional Briefing	Opportunities at SWCS Annual Conference	Opportunities at SWCS Annual Conference
August	Conservogram Article	Plan for Congressional Briefing		Listening Session or Roundtable
September		Host Congressional Briefing		
October				

November	Plan for DC Fly-in Conservogram Article			Listening Session or Roundtable
December	Plan for DC Fly-In			Brainstorm Conference Session Ideas
Ongoing	Share opportunities on social media and in Conservation News Briefs Host chapter workshops (as requested)	Monitor public comment opportunities Monitor relevant legislation and input opportunities Monitor opportunities for nominations	Grant and cooperative agreement applications Outreach to federal agencies Outreach to non-governmental partners	Write and bring forth ideas for White Papers

S&P Committee Guidelines & Roles

The SWCS Science & Policy Committee will be governed by the following guidelines. These guidelines also lay out the role of the Board Chair, Board of Directors, and SWCS staff in making decisions on policy and advocacy efforts.

A. Composition:

The committee may be composed as follows:

- a. Editor of the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation
- b. At least 3 additional members with extensive experience in science policy
- c. A representative employed at a research institution or university
- d. A practicing conservation professional (e.g., conservation district employee, retail agronomist, etc.)
- e. 2 representatives employed by federal government agencies (e.g., NRCS, EPA)
- f. Student representative
- g. Early career representative (e.g., Emerging Leaders Program participant)
- h. SWCS Chair, ex-officio member
- i. SWCS Vice Chair, ex-officio member
- j. SWCS CEO, ex-officio member

B. Tenure:

- a. The Board members' terms will coincide with their term on the Board of Directors.
- b. The policy experts will serve 3-year terms and may be renewed for an additional 3-year term
- c. The Chair of the committee will be elected by the members of the committee and will serve a two-year term
 - i. The Chair will assist the SWCS staff in developing meeting agendas as necessary.
 - ii. The Chair will work with SWCS staff to submit an end-of-year summary of S&P activities.
- d. An intentional, open call for members will take place each year at the Annual Conference. Active recruitment will take place throughout the year through events, articles, and notices in regular member communications.

C. Functions:

- a. The committee shall serve as a resource to the SWCS CEO and staff, providing counsel and advice on science policy matters and issues relevant to practitioners.

- b. The committee shall take guidance from the science policy-related goals from the SWCS Strategic Framework.
- c. The committee will:
 - i. Identify key issue areas warranting the development of an SWCS white paper/position statement
 - ii. Participate in annual Congressional/White House/Agency visits (if possible)

D. Policy Action Items:

- a. SWCS regularly signs on to community letters to Congress, the administration, or federal agencies on specific issues. Sign-on letters will fall into three categories which will dictate the action taken:
 - i. Issue that the Society has already taken a position on
 - 1. If the Society has previously taken a position on an issue, the Society can sign on to subsequent letters based on the recommendation of the SWCS CEO.
 - 2. SWCS staff will inform the S&P Committee and the Board of these letters via email.
 - 3. To reduce email traffic during busy seasons, the SWCS staff will send end-of-week update emails listing all new letters.
 - ii. Issue that the Society does not have a position on, with a sign-on deadline of greater than 2 working days
 - 1. If the Society has not previously taken a position on an issue, SWCS staff will send the request to the S&P Committee with a deadline for responding.
 - 2. SWCS staff shall then send the Committee's recommendation to the Board of Directors with a deadline for responding.
 - 3. To obtain Society approval, a majority of the voting members of the Board must respond favorably. If in the time period allotted for a response, less than a majority of the voting members of the Board respond to the request, then the Executive Committee is permitted to make a decision on behalf of the Society, taking into consideration those votes received by the voting members of the Board and Committee.
 - iii. Issue that the Society does not have a position on, with a sign-on deadline of less than 2 working days

1. Same procedure as above, except SWCS staff will send the request with a response deadline to the S&P Committee and the Board of Directors at the same time.

E. Position Statements and White Papers:

- a. Periodically, SWCS develops timely position statements and white papers on soil, water, and related natural resources conservation and related issues of interest to and under discussion by the scientific community, public, and policymakers.
- b. Position statements are brief (1-3 pp), topically focused, and contain specific recommendations or actions and accompanying justification. Position statements are of value to congressional offices if they are concise and provide actionable recommendations.
- c. White papers are often generated to address and provide an expanded exploration and discussion of a critical issue in the field or to supplement a position statement. White papers are seen as invaluable resources by White House science offices, federal science agencies, and congressional committee staff.
 - i. A position statement does not necessarily have to be accompanied by a more extensive white paper, but this may be desirable in some cases.
- d. The SWCS position statement and white paper approval process is as follows:
 - i. SWCS members or staff submit a proposed topic for a position statement and/or white paper to the SWCS Science & Policy Committee and SWCS Board of Directors (Board) for approval. If the position statement /white paper topic is approved, the Committee and Board work with the SWCS member(s) to recruit a qualified, volunteer writing team.
 - ii. Once completed, reviewed, and approved by the Committee and Board, the official SWCS position statement/white paper will be published in the SWCS journal and website and distributed to the scientific community, public, and policymakers via the Conservogram, social media, and other vehicles.

F. Board Chair's Responsibilities to the Committee:

- a. Working in concert with the SWCS Executive Committee and CEO, makes appointments to the committee.
- b. Working closely with the Committee Chair and CEO, transmits the specific tasks or duties that should be referred to the committee for its consideration.

G. Science & Policy Committee Meetings

- a. Frequency: The S&P Committee will meet monthly for 1 hour
- b. Agenda Items (Meetings without Guests):
 - i. Policy Updates from SWCS Staff
 - 1. Vote on issues (if needed)
 - 2. Determine future actions (if needed)
 - ii. Open Forum on Issues from Committee Members
 - iii. Discussion/Working Session on Opportunities
 - iv. Set priorities for next meeting
- c. Materials will be shared with committee members approximately one week in advance of the meeting
 - i. Agenda (with call for open forum items)
 - ii. Policy Updates
 - iii. Discussion Materials and Working Documents
- d. Quarterly Meetings with Guests
 - i. Listening Sessions: Bring in subject-matter experts who can share feedback with S&P committee members on pressing policy topics
 - ii. Roundtables: Host discussion with experts on emerging policy or scientific topics
- e. Special meetings may be called by the S&P Committee Chair as needed